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ABSTRACT

This study of the correlation between the self-concept of black university students and their academic persistence supports previous research identifying the importance of self-efficacy in academic persistence. Forty of the 115 18-year-old, American-born black freshmen, who lived on campus at a large predominantly white university, volunteered to participate in the project. Twenty-four females and 16 males completed a Student Demographic Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Personal Competency Rating Scale (PCI). The PCI consists of 30 5-point Likert-type items designed to assess the extent to which individuals perceived themselves to possess competencies in the following areas: (1) social; (2) personal; (3) problem-solving; and (4) functional. A follow-up study of student enrollment status was performed immediately after the first semester of the participants' fourth academic year. Analysis was performed to determine the relationships among the following factors: (1) perceived personal competencies; (2) first-year grade point average (GPA); and (3) academic persistence over the four-year period. Findings indicate that those students who obtained higher freshman GPAs, and who perceived themselves as being more personally competent, tended to persist academically. Implications for the development of retention programs for black students on predominantly white campuses are discussed. Statistical data are included on four tables. A list of 12 references is also included. (FMW)

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ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE AND BLACK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEIVED PERSONAL COMPETENCIES

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationships among the following: freshmen cumulative GPA, levels of perceived personal competencies, and 4-year continued enrollment. Results indicated that students who obtained higher first year GPAs and who perceived themselves as being more competent in areas of adapting, planning, exercising self-control, coping with failures, managing anxiety, and differentiating feelings, persisted more often than those who did not.

INTRODUCTION

Self-efficacy, a measure of an individual's opinions of his or her ability to carry out particular tasks successfully, has been identified as an important correlate of academic persistance for predominantly white student populations (Brookover, 1979; Nowicki, Jr. & Strickland, 1973). However, for black students, the literature consists of conflicting results. One explanation is that many early researchers limited sampling to only students from low-income backgrounds (Jordan, 1981); A second explanation may also result from the lack of experimental controls for variables reflecting within group diversity existing among black students in America (Banks, 1984). Social class and region are factors that are very seldom adequately controlled or examined. As a result, any valid conclusion about a clear, consistent empirical relationship between the two, black self-concept and academic persistence, presently remains nonexistent.

One outcome of this research hole in the literature is the continuation of retention programs for black students on predominantly white campuses to focus primarily, if not solely, upon the dissemination of skills that are only related to academic performance in order to assist black students' academic persistence. Such an emphasis could explain the re-

cent findings showing black students' attrition rates to be 5-8 times higher than those for white students on the same campuses (Allen, 1985).

The problem of black student attrition on predominantly white campuses remains status quo and programming remains the same, academically oriented. The present study will address the above by examining relationships among the following: freshmen cumulative grade point average, perceived personal competencies as measured by the Personal Competency Rating Scale (PCI; Paul, Pulton, Ostrow, Morrill, & Kochenor, 1981), and academic persistence.

METHOD

Participants

All entering 18-year old, American-born black freshmen who lived on campus on a large predominantly white university in central United States received a questionnaire packet (N=115). Only those students who completed the entire packet were selected for inclusion in this study (n=40). A follow-up study examining student enrollment status was done immediately after the first semester of the participants' fourth academic year.

Procedure

The researcher made the necessary contacts to obtain names of potential participants. Each participant received a packet containing: a letter of consent form, a copy of each

of the measures and a demographic sheet with instructions. Each instrument was a pencil and paper test and self-administered.

Information gained regarding individual subjects was held in strict confidence. Code numbers were assigned to each participant and only this number was used to identify participants on the instruments and demographic information sheets. The code was kept in a secure location under the control of the experimenter.

Instruments

Each survey packet contained the following: the letter of introduction and explanation; Consent for Research Participation Form; the Student Demographic Questionnaire (SDQ), and the Personal Competency Rating Scale (PCI; Paul, Pulton,Ostrow, Morrill, & Kochenor, 1981).

Student Demographic Questionnaire (SDQ): The SDQ was designed by the author and consists of 12 items addressing participants' personal and academic backgrounds.

Personal Competency Rating Scale (PCI): The PCI consists of 30 5-point Likert-type itmes designed to assess the extent to which individuals perceive themselves to possess competencies in four general areas: social, personal, problem-solving and functional.

The social subscale addresses interpersonal relationship abilities, including communication, assertive-

ness, interpersonal problem-solving, and intimacy. The personal subscale contains items reflecting an individual's abilities to adapt, plan, exercise self-control, cope with failures, manage anxiety, differentiate feelings, and enhance physical attractiveness. The problem-solving subscale examines problem-solving abilities including aspects of problem definition, alternative exploration, and resource organization. The functional subscale measures the functional competencies involving computational, reasoning, reading, writing, and time-use. Each of the subscales has been found to add to the overall measure. The instrument has content validity, and reliability has been found to be .85.

Data Analysis

The study examined the relationships among the following: 1) Perceived personal competencies; 2) first year grade point average (GPA); and 3) academic persistence over a four-year period. Pearson product r coefficients were found between each of the PCI subscale scores, and first year GPA with academic persistence over a four-year period.

RESULTS

Forty freshmen returned the survey packets. The sample was comprised of 60% (24) females and 40% (16) males. The largest group of students had fathers (39%) and mothers (43.6%) with at least a high school education and were from cities

with a population in the range of 100,000-500-,000 (48.7%). Table I presents parental educational backgrounds and population of cities of origin. These demographic results closely reflected that of the total black freshmen population (N=120). This was also true for the 4-year attrition follow-up in which a 62.5% (25) attrition rate was found, closely resembling that of the total black population over a four-year span, 62%.

Participants' mean high school GPA was 3.2 (on a 4.0 scale). The mean ACT score was found to be 15.8.

Table II presents the comparisons between means and standard deviations for students who had persisted and those who had not at the time of the four-year follow-up. Results indicated significant ($p<.01$) differences between grade point averages of students who persisted and those who did not. No significant differences were found between the mean total perceived personal competency scores when scores of persisters and nonpersisters were compared.

In Table III the Pearson Product r coefficients are presented indicating relationships between first year GPA, and each of the PCI subscales (social subscale; problem-solving subscale; functional subscale; and personal subscale) with academic persistence. In order to examine relationships with academic persistence, students were assigned numbers to indicate enrollment status after 3 1/2 years. One was as-

signed to those students who continued to be enrolled, while 2 was assigned to those who were no longer enrolled. Academic persistence was found to be significantly correlated with first year GPA (-.368), and PCI personal subscale scores (-.308). Students who obtained higher first year GPAs and who percieved themselves as being more competent in areas of adapting, planning, exercising self-control, coping with failures, managing anxiety, and differentiating feelings were those who were found to perisit academically. In other words, students who did not do well academically the freshman year, who percieved themselves as having difficulties in the areas of adapting, planning, exercising self-control, coping with failures, managing anxiety, and differentiating feelings tended most often to leave the university.

DISCUSSION

Data tends to support previous studies identifying the importance of self-efficacy (Brookover, 1979; Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) in students' academic persistence on university campuses. Burlew (1980) and Tracey & Sedlacek (1984) had also noted that personal characteristics of black youth, such as self-perceptions, could also be used to predict educational attainment. Tracey & Sedlacek (1984) found positive self-concept and realisitic self-appraisal to be predictive of the academic success of both black and white students during the first semester. However, in spite of

the well-documented correlation found between self-efficacy and academic performance and persistence, university programming tends only to address the academic deficits ignoring the importance of personal skills.

Coelho, Hamburg, & Murphey (1963) and Sedlacek & Brooks (1976) have proposed the teaching of skills that would aid in black students' being more effective in functioning in a white setting. Haettenschwiller (1971) and Vontress (1968) recommended seeking out students for anticipatory guidance and developing counseling methods to directly address interpersonal issues. Results from the present study seem to indicate similar interventions.

Given the significant correlations found between first year GPA, personal skills and academic persistence, results appear to indicate the necessity for early assessment of black freshmen's levels of academic skill (as related to freshmen coursework) as well as personal skill abilities as perceived by the student. For example, black freshmen's previous performance in coursework similar to that required during the freshmen year would be closely scrutinized with strong recommendations for tutoring in those areas where students appear to be experiencing difficulty. Students would also be requested to self-assess ability levels in areas of adapting, planning, exercising self-control, coping with failures, managing anxiety, and differentiating feelings. The impor-

tance of acquiring such skills in surviving to matriculation might be presented during orientation and prescheduled programming addressing all areas would be presented periodically throughout the academic year. Balancing programming addressing both academic skills and personal skills seem critical.

Implementing such programming would demand cooperation of several offices across predominantly white campuses. For example, offices of minority affairs, learning centers, and university counseling centers could form a special student affairs retention unit, working closely with deans and faculty of academic departments. Workshops addressing both academic and personal development skills might be offered on a regular basis throughout the semester. Locations for such could be altered between the office serving as the primary sponsor, union, and dormitories. Altering the site of workshops could reduce the hesitency for many students who have difficulty engaging in behaviors that might be interpreted as "going for help". This might be particularly true if all programming occurs within the couseling center, which may have negative connoctations for many black students. The importance of students engaging in activities that would not only assist in academic and professional development, but, personally as well would be relayed during orientation. More critically, possible outcomes for not doing so would also be shared.

Another recommendation would be to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of any program intervention plan. Follow-up studies of student participants might be done in order to evaluate the effectivenes of the program in addressing student academic performance and persistence. Participants' academic performance and persistence might then be compared with nonparticipants in order to evaluate program effectiveness and receive critical information that could lead to refining program development strategies. The result would be a collaborative university wide effort to effect change.

On the other hand, of equal interest are the lack of significant correlations between academic persistence and other PCI subscales, particularly the functional subscale which measures students' perception of general skill competency in areas directly related to succeeding academically, reading, writing, and arithmetic. One explanation might be that actual competency as opposed to perceived competency in the indicated areas measured by the other subscales would be more accurate in predicting academic persistence. Future reserach with a larger sample size representing a number of predominantly white university campuses might provide more answers. Such would be essential in order to alter the pattern of high black student attrition on predominantly white campuses.

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TABLE I
Demographic Information

Table Ia

Frequencies of varying eduation
levels of parents of student sample

	Father		Mother	
Level	#	%	#	%
1	2	4.9	1	2.6
2	16	39.0	17	43.6
3	2	4.9	6	15.4
4	7	17.1	10	25.6
5	6	14.6	2	5.1
6	0	0	0	0
7	8	19.5	3	7.7

Level 1 = Elementary
2 = High School
3 = Some College
4 = Bachelors
5 = Masters
6 = Ph.D.
7 = No Response

Table Ib

Hometown Population
sizes of student sample

Population	#	%
0 - 50,000	14	35.8
50,001 - 100,000	2	5.1
100,001 - 500,000	19	48.7
500,001 - 1,000,000	0	0
1,000,000+	4	10.2

TABLE II

Comparisons between means and standard deviations for students who were and no longer enrolled at the four-year follow-up

	Enrolled (N=25)		No longer enrolled (N=15)	
	X	SD	X	SD
Total PCI score	3.95	.45	3.77	.56
Freshmen GPA 1**	2.53	.79	1.91	.88

** means that were significantly different at .01 level

GPA 1=the first year grade point averages

TABLE III

CORRELATIONS
PEARSON PRODUCT R

	F	P	P-S	S	GPA1
Enrollment Status (ENR)*	-.27	-.30	-.15	-.22	-.36

F =functional competency subscores

P =personal competency subscale scores

P-S=problem-solving competency subscale scores

S =social skills subscale scores

* Students who continued to be enrolled during follow-up were assigned the #1, while students who were no longer enrolled were assigned the #2.

The only significant ($p<.05$) correlations with enrollment status were first year GPA (GPA 1) and the personal skills subscale scores.